

## **Historic, Archive Document**

Do not assume content reflects current scientific knowledge, policies, or practices.





aTX341  
F615  
4/11/87

SDA

USDA  
AGRIC. LIBRARY  
RECEIVED  
MAY 1987

An Interview with  
USDA Secretary  
Richard E. Lyng  
pg. 2

# Food & Nutrition

April 1987 Volume 17 Number 2



## Food Distribution: Supporting America's Farmers Feeding America's People



# Food Distribution:

## Making A Good Program Even Better

### An Interview with USDA Secretary Richard E. Lyng

To picture America is to evoke a vision of agricultural plenty. Yet images of Kansas wheat fields, California truck gardens, or herds of grazing cattle also call to mind a problem at the heart of the farm economy—a problem that has dogged policymakers at USDA and in Congress since the 1930s.

That problem is how to maintain a system that allows American farmers a respectable profit for their labors while providing American consumers with a wide variety and reliable supply of food at affordable prices and regaining lost agricultural markets overseas.

Since the Great Depression, the federal government has supported farm income by removing surplus food from the market. Because we Americans cannot accept the idea of food going to waste while some people go wanting, one facet of farm policy has been devising ways to deliver this surplus food to those who cannot afford an adequate diet.

In March 1986, Richard E. Lyng was sworn in as Secretary of Agriculture, and took on this continuing challenge.

He brought to the task a thorough knowledge of the complex interdependence of agricultural supply and demand and a deep concern for the human dimensions of farm and food policy.

Before serving with the federal government, Secretary Lyng was president of a family seed and bean production and processing company. Later, he headed the California State Department of Agriculture. Prior to his current appointment, he had served as a USDA official on two separate occasions, as Assistant Secretary and as Deputy Secretary.

In the following interview, Secretary Lyng describes how national efforts to stabilize farm prices also serve to improve the well-being of needy Americans. He outlines the many ways in

which USDA seeks to respond to the needs of food service workers in schools and other institutions who daily transform USDA-donated commodities into nutritious, economical, and appealing meals.

**Q. Mr. Secretary, I understand you have been involved for years with the development of USDA programs to aid farmers and feed needy Americans. Can you tell us something about that experience?**

**A.** Yes, I have been working with these programs for 20 years. When I first came to the Department in 1969, I was Assistant Secretary for what was then called Marketing and Consumer Services.

During my first year on the job, I set up the Food and Nutrition Service, which administered—and still administers—the various food assistance programs, including the school lunch and food distribution programs.

I am very proud of the fact that we now have programs in place that are capable of reaching every American in need.

**Q. A great many changes have occurred during the years that you have been associated with the commodity program. In your view, what are the most significant?**

**A.** Two major changes come to mind. Early in my tenure there were efforts to scale back and even phase out the distribution of commodities because the surpluses we had in earlier times had all but disappeared and it was believed they were not likely to recur.

This trend has reversed recently as huge agricultural surpluses have again accumulated, especially dairy products. As a result, farm income has dropped and commodity programs have re-emerged as even more vital to our overall efforts to help farmers and feed needy Americans. This is one major change.

Another change has occurred in terms of the food distribution program itself. More than ever before, we recognize that we are serving both producers and consumers.

The legislation of the '30s and '40s that gave the Secretary of Agriculture authority to prop up sagging commodity prices was specifically focused on restoring prosperity to the agricultural sector. We began donating food in order to dispose of the surplus food acquired.

However, beginning with passage of the National School Lunch Act in 1946, food distribution took on the additional purpose of promoting healthful diets for children and needy Americans.

The need to provide service to schools has resulted in a far greater array of commodities than was previously available. Years ago, the types of food donated were fewer, and they were more likely to arrive in bulky cuts and unwieldy containers. The food distributed was often seen as a rather inconvenient gift. Recipients had to scramble to find a place to store the food and plan their menus around it.

As the schools became a major outlet for commodities, their needs influenced the form and timing of the food received. Food is now processed into forms more easily used by schools, charitable institutions, soup kitchens, and other outlets. Twenty years ago, no one ever even thought of distributing items such as frozen french fries and chicken nuggets.

**Q. Are schools the primary outlet for surplus commodities?**

**A.** Schools are the primary outlet for perishable commodities that USDA buys to remove surplus products from regional markets. These items make up 85 percent of a school's food "entitlement," the commodities that USDA is obligated by law to contribute to each lunch served.

The balance of the entitlement commodities are grain, oil, and peanut products purchased to support prices at Congressionally established levels.





Secretary Lyng has been involved with the food distribution and school lunch programs for many years. He is pictured here with students during a National School Lunch Week luncheon.

Schools are also a major outlet for dairy products, honey, and other price support commodities that the government buys and holds in storage. When the amounts of food in storage reach a high level, USDA declares a "bonus," and schools and other outlets may order whatever amounts above their entitlement they can use.

Sometimes perishable food is also offered as a bonus. This was the case when the dairy buy-out program made large amounts of ground beef available.

**Q.** What is the history of food distribution to individual households?

**A.** The amounts distributed to households have varied with the size of government surpluses, and enactment of the Food Stamp Program.

In the 1950s and 1960s, price support commodities were the major form of food assistance to the needy.

In the early 1970s, we expanded the Food Stamp Program nationally to give recipients more flexibility in obtaining a healthful diet. I remember when I was an assistant secretary I presented the issue of whether to make this change to President Nixon and his Cabinet. Our intention ever since that meeting has been to operate a Food Stamp Program in lieu of direct distribution of food to households.

Of course, in 1981 when I was USDA Deputy Secretary we were troubled by the accumulation of such large stocks of cheese. Shortly before that Christmas, President Reagan had us start providing cheese to states for distribution to low-income households.

I sat down with a handful of USDA staff and we drafted a two-page agree-

ment that served as the basis for each state's distribution program. Of course, what started with a modest level of cheese distribution in 1981 has now grown into a major national program including other products.

Unlike the earlier program of food distribution to households, however, the donated food is a supplement to food stamps while we have these surpluses.

It has been a sizable supplement. In 1986, households received more than a billion pounds of food through this program. While this form of food distribution is the most visible to the public, it remains a response to temporary surpluses.

In fact, we are gradually making a dent in the amount of dairy surplus in storage, and I hope we are also moving toward a better balance between production and demand.



**Q.** What about perishable commodities? How are USDA purchases of these commodities significant to farmers?

**A.** The law allows us the flexibility to enter a regional market on a timely basis and buy commodities in surplus situations, thereby relieving depressed markets.

By creating an immediate outlet, we also open new markets for farm products. The National School Lunch Program feeds millions of children every day in 90,000 schools throughout the country. School lunches, and other

commodity programs, introduce children to foods which may be new to them.

**Q.** How well does the commodity program respond to the needs and preferences of its customers?

**A.** By and large, the school lunch people I talk to are pleased with the commodities we provide. While the system is working better now than ever before, it is far from perfect. I recently met with the president and other members of the American School Food Service Association and discussed ways to improve the system.

At that meeting, I pledged the Department's full support in addressing problems in the current system. To honor that commitment, I asked my deputy, Peter Myers, to head a top level task force to sift through the various criticisms of the system and report back to me on how we can improve. By working closely with the American School Food Service Association and others, I am confident we can make a good program even better.

**Q.** What are some of those concerns?

**A.** Concerns most often expressed fell under three headings. They were problems in delivery, in communication, and in the type or form of the food received.

One way in which we have responded to past complaints about deliveries was to expand the number of periods during which states may order



Millions of Americans of all ages—from children eating lunch at school to elderly people taking part in nutrition programs—benefit from food donated by USDA.



fruits and vegetables. The task force I established is discussing additional changes in federal shipping practices to determine whether they might better meet state needs.

Of course, some concerns need to be addressed at the state and local levels. All states do not have equally efficient delivery systems. The cost and frequency of delivery vary widely. We are also interested in providing help to them through policy guidance and technical assistance.

**Q. What are the communication problems?**

**A.** We hear complaints that information from our national headquarters about the food available and how best to store and use it does not reach the local school level.

Donated commodities make up about a quarter of the food served in school lunches. School food service managers buy the rest of the food locally. In order to plan ahead, they need prompt information on what foods they

will be getting from us.

We are working harder at getting this information to state distributing agencies in a timely way, along with fact sheets on packaging, product specifications, storage, and handling.

We have also developed new recipes that will help food managers put the commodities to good use in ways that children and other customers find appealing.

**Q. How are you addressing concerns over the type of food received?**

**A.** For one thing, we're listening very carefully to the suggestions we get from schools. We know they want food that is safe, convenient, and popular with children. And they prefer food that is packaged or processed in ways that save labor and help them meet current concerns about nutrition.

As examples, within the last several years, we have arranged to buy frozen ground beef with a reduced fat content and canned fruit in light syrup or natu-

ral juices. We now provide raisins in individual serving cartons as well as in bulk.

We have also reduced the salt content of canned beef and pork and replaced turkey rolls with turkey roasts, which children greatly prefer. We now purchase a potato that makes our french fries more comparable to those served by fast food chains.

Along with changes in the products, we have expanded the variety of food we offer. We now provide both chunky and smooth peanut butter, both bleached and unbleached flour, and ground beef in several different forms.

Even with improvements in quality and packaging, donated commodities are likely to be less processed than foods the schools buy. For instance, by donating flour, we encourage schools to do their own baking. And we all know that freshly baked bread not only tastes good, it smells good. But it does require kitchen facilities and labor that are not available in all schools.

One widely used solution to this problem is to contract with bakers and

## How does the program work?

To tie farm market support to food assistance needs, the Food Distribution Program must reconcile the interests of producers, consumers, and taxpayers. One official describes the task as getting the right product to the right place at the right time in the right condition.

To do this efficiently, a complex system of teamwork has evolved among federal program managers, state distributing agencies, commercial processors, school food managers, and nonprofit organizations throughout the nation.

### Three USDA agencies work together...

Three different USDA agencies take part in purchasing and distributing commodities.

The Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) and the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS) buy surplus food to remove it from the market. They also grade and distribute the food. Working with the states, the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) determines who is eligible for the food and what their needs are.

This is how it works:

Beginning each spring, FNS staff meet with representatives from the other two USDA agencies involved to develop a purchase plan. They project the type, amount, and timing of commodities likely to be available; the estimated cost; and the amount and type of appropriated funds. They match this information with user preferences.

The plan is revised periodically during the year to reflect changes in market conditions and other factors.

Because schools are a primary user of USDA-donated food, the planners take into account as much as possible school food service directors' preferences in terms of types of food, packaging, and delivery.

### Many kinds of food available

More than 60 kinds of food are generally available for distribution. Specific items vary depending on farm production and the market.

USDA regularly purchases certain commodities to meet the nutritional needs of recipients. Some items are purchased because they are tradi-

tionally well accepted. Within the limits of price and supply, USDA tries to offer schools and other programs the products they like.

When the purchase plan is completed, FNS sends out to state agencies a list of foods expected to be available. States send back rough estimates of what their schools and institutions can use. USDA then orders commodities from inventories or, through AMS or ASCS, invites bids from suppliers on the open market.

The Kansas City Commodity Office, a division of ASCS, arranges for transportation of donated food to the states from the supplier or from the Commodity Credit Corporation storage facilities.

USDA pays the cost of initial processing and packaging of the food and transporting it to designated warehouses or railcar unloading sites within each state. Where the food is to be further processed, delivery can be made to the commercial firm.

State distributing agencies are responsible for storing the food and delivering it to local agencies operating FNS food assistance programs.

Last year, through this system, states distributed 2.8 billion pounds of food, worth more than \$2 billion.



other commercial processing firms. These companies convert commodities into ready-to-use items which they sell to schools at a price discounted by the value of the donated ingredients. A typically popular item is pizza made with donated cheese, flour, vegetable oil, and tomato paste.

In recent years, the federally operated National Commodity Processing Program has managed some of these contracts. However, instead of making more finished products available to food assistance programs, federal and state processors have too often duplicated each other's efforts and competed for the same business.

Therefore, we are testing a new national system in which the Food and Nutrition Service and states will share responsibility. Under this system, the Food and Nutrition Service will determine which companies are eligible to offer states their services. The states, in turn, will market the end products and ensure that schools and other outlets get their full dollar's worth of value.

**Q.** What are we doing to improve food distribution services provided at the state level?

**A.** This is a matter of great concern to us. The commodity program at the national level is only as strong as the services state food distributing agencies give their clients. And schools have raised valid concerns on such matters as how states manage their inventories and what they charge for delivery.

Some states have used our technical assistance and their own resources to improve delivery service. Several have lowered costs by using commercial distributors. Others have expanded deliveries of donated food to programs serving the elderly. At least three states have sponsored Agricultural Weeks to highlight the natural alliance between agriculture and our food assistance programs. There is still a lot more to be done in this area.

Currently, we are collecting information for an in-depth assessment of every state's food distribution operation. The results will enable us to pinpoint areas of weakness at the state level, and to work with states to improve their systems.

**Q.** You haven't mentioned concerns over quality. Is that an issue?

**A.** Occasionally, but to a much lesser degree than improved service. The laws that protect the safety of this country's food supply apply equally to commodities and to commercially marketed food products. For instance, inspectors from our Food Safety and Inspection Service check all meat and poultry for sanitation and wholesomeness.

Moreover, we only purchase commodities from suppliers who can meet our product specifications. These require products equal to or better than those available on your grocery shelf.

Since so many schools use our commodities in stove-top and oven-ready products such as pizza, beef patties, burritos, egg rolls, and fish nuggets, we have developed a system of "child nutrition labeling" for processed foods. Companies know they can more readily market their products to schools if the label confirms that the type and amount of ingredients used meet our school meal pattern requirements.

In short, we think it is imperative that food we buy and distribute to schools meets high quality standards. Occasionally, you see a news item about a recall of a donated USDA food.

Since we look hard for problems, we sometimes find problems. Having a system in place to immediately withdraw any questionable item is really an added assurance that we take every potential food problem very seriously.

**Q.** There seems to be a growing interest in giving schools some form of cash assistance instead of commodities. Would you comment on that?

**A.** I don't believe that the proposed alternatives would be as effective as the present system in meeting agricultural objectives and offering a comparable level of support to schools.

The purchasing power of USDA not only stabilizes depressed markets for farmers, it brings to medium-sized and smaller school districts throughout the United States the benefit of volume buying.

Currently, commodities make up one quarter to a third of the value of the average school lunch. This subsidy has been instrumental in holding prices at a level that attracts high participation by making school lunches one of today's best food bargains.

## Who gets USDA food?

**The food USDA buys goes to:**

**Children, through the National School Lunch Program, the Child Care Food Program, and the Summer Food Service Program.** USDA food also goes to children in nonprofit summer camps, and schools that get USDA commodities but do not participate in the National School Lunch Program.

**Needy households on Indian reservations and in the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands.**

**Needy people in charitable institutions, such as hospitals and institutions for mentally or physically handicapped children and adults, nursing homes, and orphanages.**

**Elderly people and their spouses, through nutrition programs for the elderly, authorized by the Older Americans Act.**

**Pregnant and breastfeeding women, infants, and children up to 6 years of age who participate in the Commodity Supplemental Food Program, a special nutrition program serving mothers and children who are at risk because of low income and poor diet. The program also serves elderly persons.**

**People who live in a declared disaster area, if they are eligible for meals that disaster relief agencies prepare and serve at central locations.**

**Households that meet state rules of eligibility based on economic need, under the Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP).** Each state's allotment is based on its levels of unemployment and poverty. Together with school lunches, TEFAP now accounts for about 85 percent of the value of all donated food.



**Q.** In view of its commitment to farmers, can USDA be objective in considering "cashing out" commodities?"

**A.** It would not be objective to ignore an adverse effect on farmers. The dual benefits of this program to farmers and consumers stand as its beauty and strength. Sound policy will be served only by considering both the production and consumption sides of the issue.

At the request of Congress, we commissioned a study to explore the relative advantages of different systems of providing food assistance to schools and other institutions.

Despite somewhat higher storage and handling costs, the study's review panel found that donated food provides the National School Lunch Program with as much as 2 cents per meal in greater value than alternative systems. We calculated that this would represent a total annual savings of \$100 million.

The alternatives tested were to give school districts cash instead of commodities, or to issue letters of credit, which are vouchers that can be redeemed only for certain types of food.

While the alternatives did offer schools greater flexibility in their food purchases, the commodity program provided more food for the same cost. Also, because donated food was less highly processed, the children tended to consume less salt than under the alternative systems.

**Q.** What would happen to the other programs dependent on food distribution activities if schools were given cash or letters of credit instead of commodities?

**A.** If we lost schools as our major customer for donated food, that would certainly have an adverse impact on other programs dependent on food distribution activities.

In particular, we would have a difficult time feeding people who are displaced from their homes by natural disasters, such as floods or hurricanes. The fact that we have food in school warehouses, and a system in place for delivering it, enables us to respond promptly.

Some of our other food assistance programs would be jeopardized as well. Sharing the pipeline permits small agencies to benefit from state and na-

## What laws authorize USDA to purchase and distribute food?

**USDA purchases and distributes commodities under several legislative authorities:**

**Section 32** (of Public Law 74-320) allows the government to remove surpluses of perishable, nonbasic commodities from normal channels. Commodities usually purchased under Section 32 are fruits, vegetables, meats, and poultry products. These purchases are financed by an appropriation from import duties.

**Section 416** (of the Agricultural Act of 1949) authorizes USDA to donate foods acquired through price support activity. These are generally basic commodities such as dairy products, grains, oils, honey, soy beans, and peanut products.

**Section 311** (of the Older Americans Act) requires USDA to donate a minimum level in commodities, or cash in lieu of commodities, to nutrition programs for the elderly funded under the Older Americans Act.

**Section 4(a)** (of the Agricultural and Consumer Protection Act) authorizes food distribution to Indians and participants in the Commodity Supplemental Food Program.

**Section 6** (of the National School Lunch Act) requires USDA to provide states with a minimum level of commodity assistance for schools. The currently required level is food valued at 11.25 cents per meal. Section 6 requires USDA to make up any shortfall in commodity assistance with cash in lieu of commodities. Section 6 funds are used to buy both basic and perishable commodities, including preferred items that are not necessarily in surplus.

**Section 14** (of the National School Lunch Act) gives USDA special purchase authority to buy, with funds from Section 32 and Section 416, commodities at current market prices even though they do not meet surplus or price support conditions.

tional processing contracts, warehousing, and transport services.

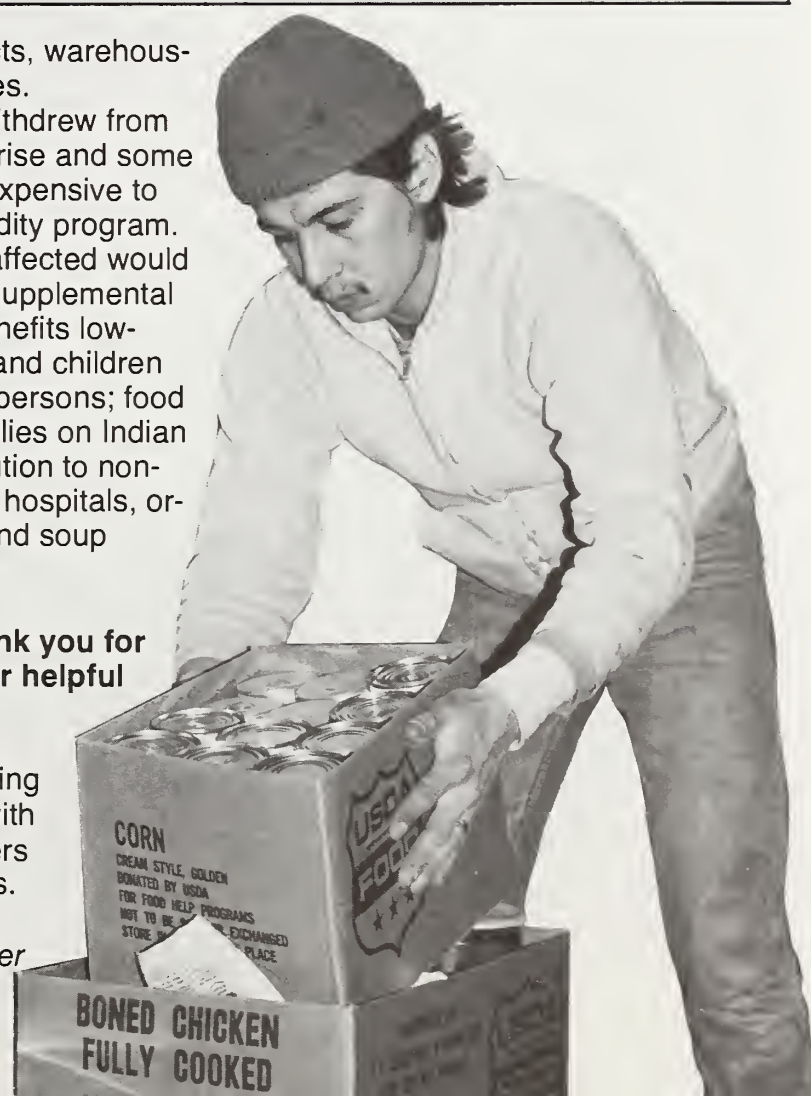
If such a large client withdrew from the system, costs would rise and some outlets would find it too expensive to participate in the commodity program.

Programs likely to be affected would include the Commodity Supplemental Food Program, which benefits low-income women, infants, and children as well as needy elderly persons; food distribution to needy families on Indian reservations; and distribution to non-profit institutions such as hospitals, orphanages, food banks, and soup kitchens.

**Q.** Mr. Secretary, thank you for your time and your helpful comments.

**A.** Thank you for allowing me to talk directly with *Food and Nutrition* readers interested in commodities.

*interview by Wini Scheffler*







## The Kansas City Commodity Office-- A Vital Link In the Chain

The federal commodity procurement and distribution system has developed from its Depression-era beginnings into a coordinated effort involving three USDA agencies—the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS), the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS), and the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS).

Central to this system is ASCS' Kansas City Commodity Office (KCCO), which plays a key role in getting federally purchased food where it needs to go.

KCCO's responsibilities fall into several areas. One is arranging for USDA food to be commercially processed through contracts with private vendors—having USDA wheat, for example, processed into flour. Another is arranging and monitoring transportation of USDA food—both processed and bulk commodities—to a number of domestic and overseas programs.

Originally set up in 1939 as a regional office of the Commodity Credit Corporation, KCCO became one of the country's principal food procurement offices during World War II. By 1966, KCCO attained nationwide responsibility for bulk commodities and by 1975 for processing operations.

KCCO handles commodities such as cheese, wheat, butter, bulk corn, barley, rice, honey, peanuts, and more than 100 different processed commodities. In the course of a year, KCCO arranges for shipment of more than 56,000 railcars and 101,000 truckloads of food.

It is a big job and involves two other large facilities—the ASCS Kansas City

Management Office and a separate data processing center in Fort Collins, Colorado. All of this is necessary, though, because KCCO must maintain routine communications with processing vendors, truckers, and recipient agencies for the procurement, delivery, and storage of the foods.

### Shipments are carefully monitored

According to Norman Houser, director of KCCO, the giant commodity office functions in much the same manner as would a floor trader at the stock exchange. As orders to buy are received, KCCO executes them.

"For the most part," says Houser, "it's a fairly straightforward operation. There are, of course, occasional administrative problems."

Some of the administrative problems involve unacceptable products or vendor delays. Since ASCS is responsible for transportation, any problems that may occur in delivery also fall back on KCCO.

For example, a trucker may call in wanting a place to unload part of his shipment. Perhaps bad weather has delayed his delivery, and he may need to stay overnight because he cannot make it to the next site in time to find staff still on duty there.

For the massive amount of food shipped, there are not that many problems. But ASCS knows full well that if you are the one who does not get the delivery on time, their good record does not help.

According to FNS regional Food Distribution Program (FDP) staff in Denver who deal with KCCO's processed commodities division on a regular basis, KCCO is FDP's right hand. Marketing specialists at KCCO can trace lost shipments or check orders for all FNS programs.

The FDP staff cite the time of the first cheese distribution—forerunner of the current Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP)—which began in December 1981.

It was new for the states, and KCCO marketing specialists also had to react to a totally new situation. According to Mary Nielsen of FNS' Mountain Plains Regional Office, KCCO made a number of adjustments to accommodate the states. In some instances, individual marketing specialists made extraordinary efforts to ensure that shipments of cheese arrived.

### Much time spent on FNS programs

ASCS is responsible for international and domestic programs. Jerry Perkins, chief of the processed commodities division at KCCO, and his staff spend a large part of their efforts on FNS' programs. Domestic programs, according to Perkins, account for about half of his division's staff time.

Last year, approximately 2.8 billion pounds of USDA-donated foods were distributed through FNS programs. Of that amount, 1.3 billion pounds went to schools and 1.5 billion pounds to other agencies and organizations, such as day care centers, summer camps, meal services for the elderly, charitable institutions, disaster relief centers, and community outlets operating TEFAP.

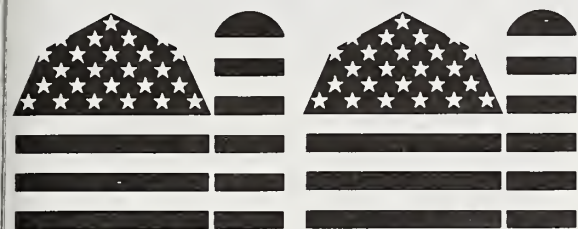
USDA food was also distributed to needy people on Indian reservations and to agencies operating the Commodity Supplemental Food Program.

One of the domestic programs that requires a lot of staff time is the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations. Tribal needs dictate the unique tailoring of shipments for Indian programs. A carload or truckload shipment of a food received by KCCO must be sorted and then shipped to reservations as part of an assortment of 20 to 40 items in a food package.

The food packages include a variety of canned products (fruits, vegetables, meat or poultry), along with staples such as rice, corn meal, sugar, flour, honey, nonfat dry milk or other needed foods. Because of the need to sort a variety of these foods into one shipment, this is a more complicated and staff-intensive effort than just routing an entire carload of a single commodity.

Food and Nutrition





# Commodities and School Lunch: A Winning Combination

## Many products delivered directly

Jerry Perkins emphasizes that most ASCS purchases do not go into storage. Grain products and oils, for example, go directly from the processors to the FNS programs that will use them.

Some dairy surplus, of course, is maintained in storage. However, even many dairy products require further processing or packaging prior to use by recipient agencies. Cheese, for example, may have to be converted from cheddar to process cheese, and butter into smaller "prints."

In other cases, according to Jerry Perkins, AMS purchases are stored prior to shipment because they are purchased on a seasonal basis. The vast majority of products, however, are delivered directly from the vendor or processor to the ultimate user. This saves the cost of re-routing, storing, and handling. If storage is necessary, it is contracted under a commercial storage agreement at the best price obtainable.

This system does have its complications, however. Fluctuating market situations may govern routing. For example, at certain times there may be an abundance of millers to handle flour, but during peak commercial seasons the mills may be too busy to process for USDA. ASCS must balance market situations and surpluses against needs.

Jerry Perkins stresses the routine nature of much of KCCO's work. "We are here to service the programs," he says. "We try to make sure we do the best job we can."

Even if this routine job looks like a juggling act to outsiders, it is all in a day's work to the staff at KCCO. It's simple—if you happen to be a combined traffic cop, computer expert, and balancing wizard, that is.

For more information, contact:  
Jerry C. Perkins, Chief  
Processed Commodities Division  
Kansas City Commodity Office  
Kansas City, Missouri 64114  
Telephone: (816) 926-6715

## Food from USDA Helps Schools Keep Prices Low And Quality High

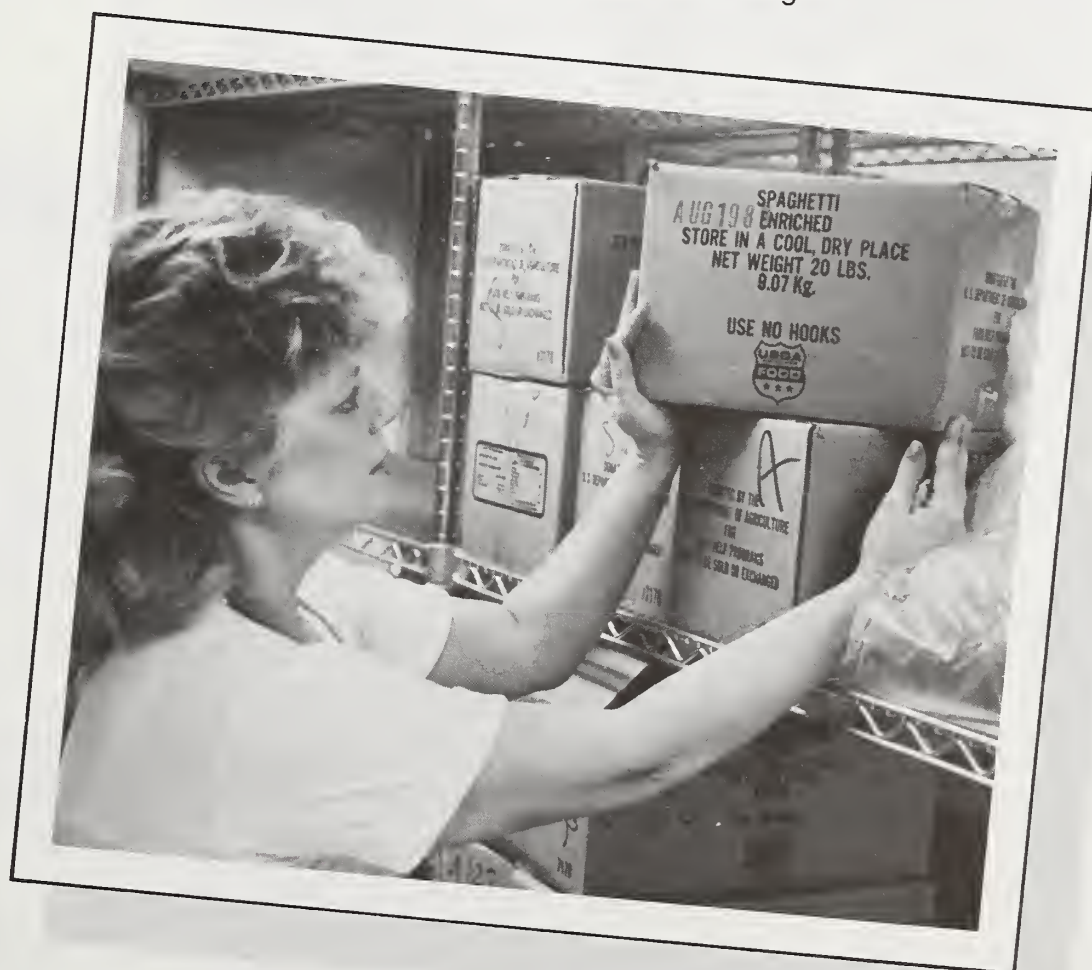
Everyone has heard about school lunches. But not everyone knows that commodities from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) are an important part of today's school lunch program.

Many school food service directors depend on USDA-donated food to serve nutritious, economical meals and to provide quality food choices.

One school district that depends on commodities is Muscogee County (Columbus), Georgia. School food director Catherine Cary believes USDA-donated products provide the best dollar value in food to students.

"The federal government can provide more food for the dollar because it has greater purchasing power than we have locally," she says. "I also believe in the tradition of commodities for school lunch. These are products that are grown in this country and help support our own farmers."

Columbus school lunches continue to be a bargain. "We have kept lunch prices very low, and commodities have helped us to do this," says Cary. "If we didn't have these foods, there would be no way that we could feed students for what we charge."



Enriched spaghetti is one of the many USDA products Muscogee County staff use in preparing school meals.



★ WINNING COMBINATION ★ WINNING COMBINATION ★

**Schools offered variety of foods**

USDA donates more than 50 different kinds of food, including ground beef, chicken, turkey, canned fruits, fruit juices, vegetables, cereals and grains, dairy products, vegetable oil, and peanut products.

Cary has found that the non-frozen commodities can be handled efficiently in the school district's warehouse system.

"For several years we used a commercial vendor system to distribute all USDA commodities to the schools. This was very satisfactory, but this year we are handling the bulk of the commodities ourselves because we have an efficient warehouse system in place.

"We feel we can save some money since we already have storage space, delivery workers, and trucks available," Cary says.

Columbus has a unique school population because Fort Benning, a large military base, is located there. Military families from throughout the nation and from different countries are stationed in the area. The commodities have been accepted well in all district schools, even with the various regional and ethnic food tastes of the students.

"The commodities are top quality," says Cary, "comparable to commercial foods. We sometimes have minor problems with purchased foods and occasionally might have a minor problem with commodities. But, with the thousands of pounds of commodities we use, these problems have been minimal."

Cary insists that students can't tell the difference between food items made with commodities and with commercial products.

"We use the ground beef in many

ways," she says, "and we make a number of baked items, like pizza and homemade rolls, from commodity flour."

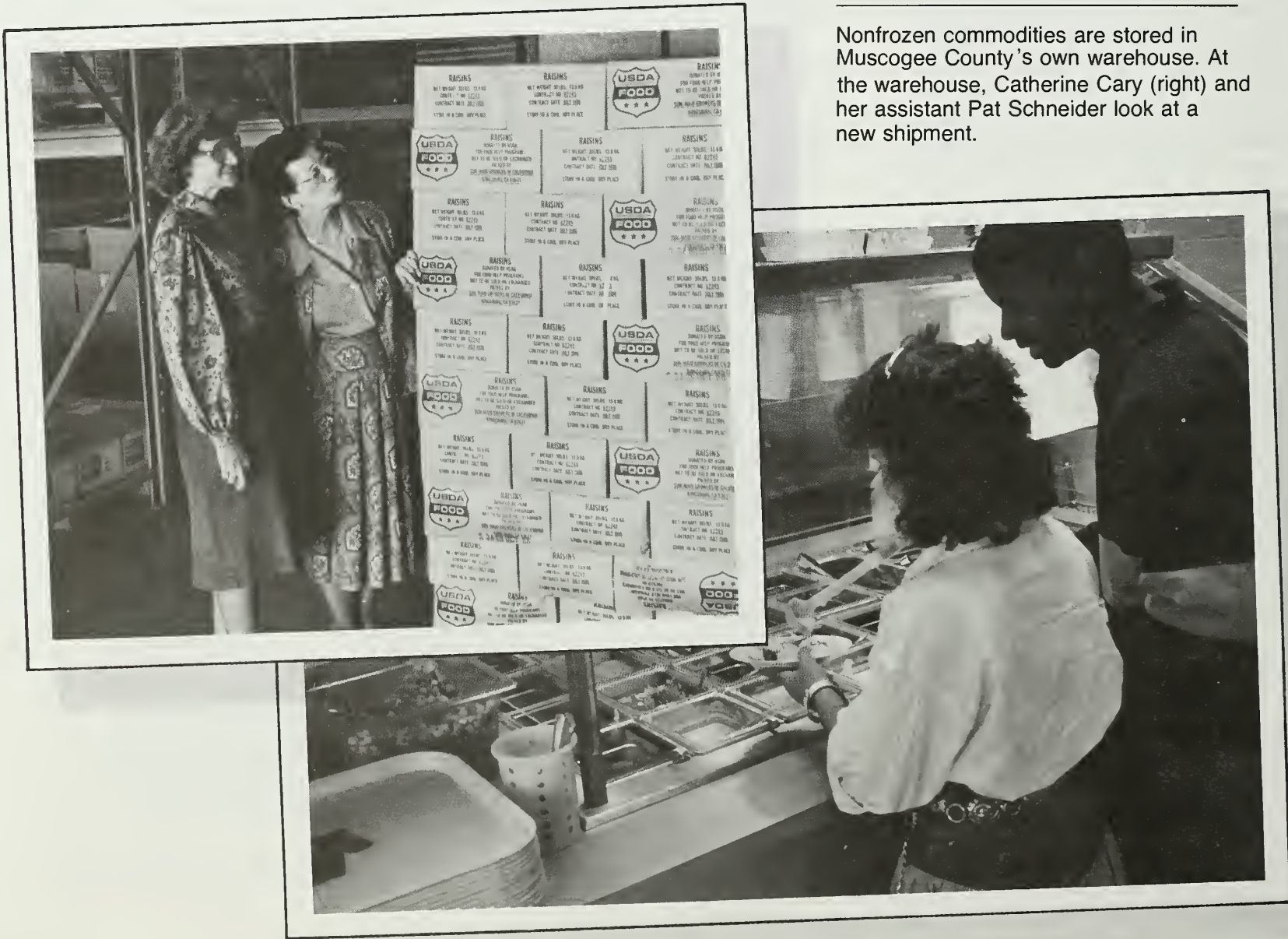
**Processing offers added flexibility**

Cary pleases her customers while cutting costs by using processing contracts with commercial firms.

"Students are accustomed to meat patties done a certain way, and even the shape may turn a child off. But we are able to send some of our commodity ground beef to commercial processors to make different styles of patties for about 9 cents a serving.

"We would have to pay 25 cents a serving if we had to buy them commercially. We don't have to purchase any beef patties since we can process the commodity beef the way we want it," Cary says.

Nonfrozen commodities are stored in Muscogee County's own warehouse. At the warehouse, Catherine Cary (right) and her assistant Pat Schneider look at a new shipment.





# ★ WINNING COMBINATION ★ WINNING COMBINATION ★

Some food items cannot be made entirely with USDA-donated foods, but processors can use one or more USDA foods and sell the final product to schools at a discount. Columbus schools buy several items that provide a rebate because they contain USDA commodities.

Assistant school food director Pat Schneider says the rebate products save money and time.

"Not every school can make products, such as mayonnaise and salad dressings, that are available as rebate items," she says.

"Even though we do a lot of 'from-scratch' cooking, we're not going to make some products, like crackers, that are available with rebates. Commodity processing greatly reduces the price while still giving you a quality product."

With the variety provided by commodities and processed items, Muscogee County staff feel they can compete better with local fast food operations.

"Because the commodities represent a large dollar value of the food we serve, we can afford to provide even more choices from commercial foods," says Cary.

Cary's schools are reducing fat and restricting sodium in their meals. Many students in Muscogee County schools now choose 2-percent low-fat milk. Using commodity non-fat dry milk in cooked foods is compatible with this trend.

## Managers pleased with improvements

In Florence, South Carolina, school food service director Donna Pratt shares Cary's concerns about quality

and cost. Like Cary, she finds that donated foods help her offer students a variety of choices at prices they can afford.

"Commodities help us serve a quality meal that meets all nutritional requirements at a reasonable price," she says.

Like many school districts in the Southeast, Pratt's district uses a commercial food distributor to store and deliver USDA commodities to schools.

Before the district began using a commercial vendor, Pratt used to be a consignee for commodities, which meant she had to notify other school districts when a shipment of commodities was coming in.

"I never had a real holiday since I had to be ready at any time to meet a railcar or truckload of commodities and oversee the distribution for hundreds of other schools," she says.

"Many times I stood out in ice or snow waiting for school districts to pick up their share of the foods. Needless

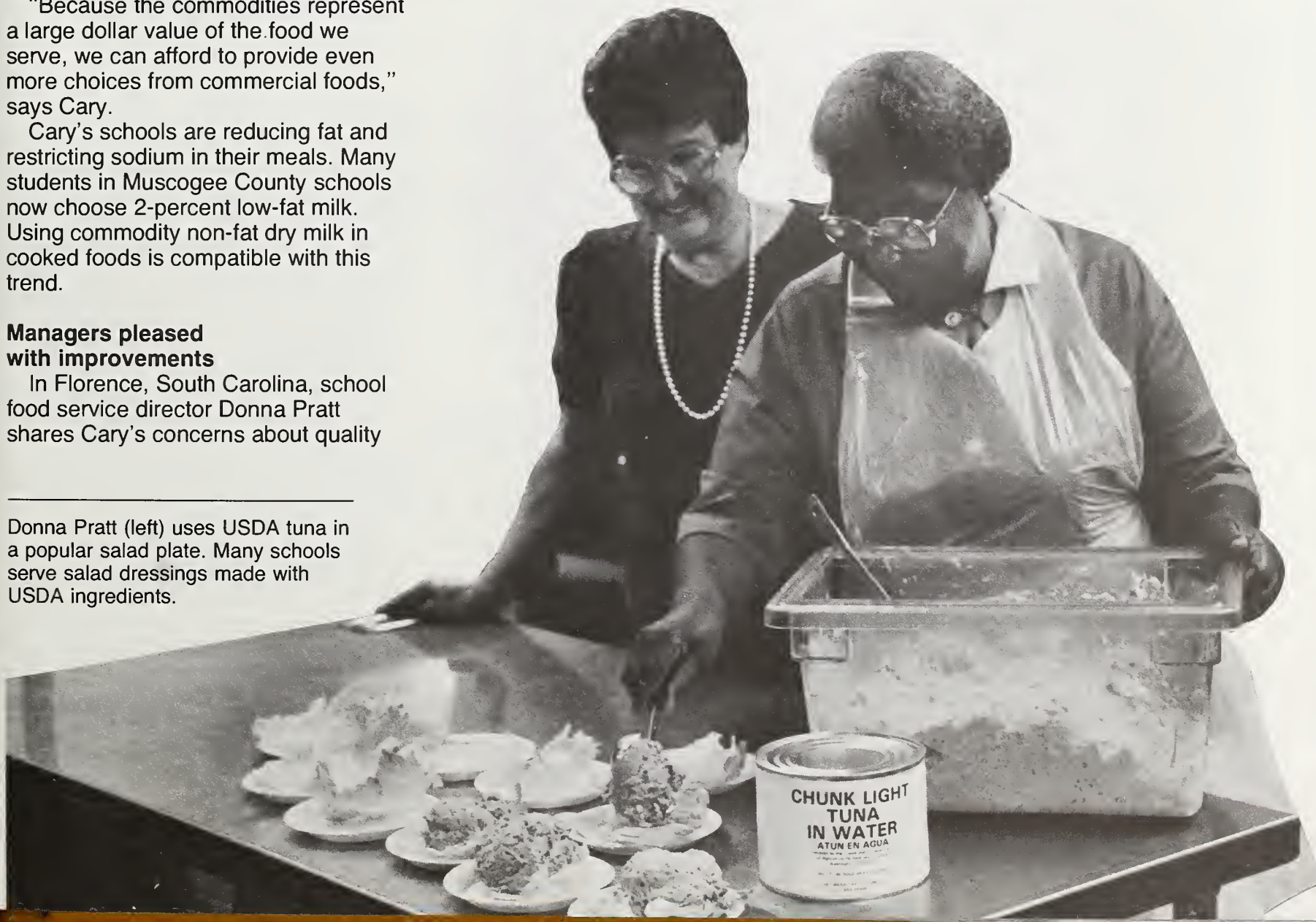
to say, when we decided to go to commercial distributors to handle the commodities, I was ecstatic!"

Pratt now uses a statewide contract with a commercial food vendor to store and distribute commodities to each of her 18 schools. Under the contract, the commercial warehouse stores each commodity shipment up to 60 days without any additional costs.

"One of the nice things about the vendor system," says Pratt, "is that you are not required to take everything at one time. You can get your commodities and commercial foods delivered when you need them. This really helps since storage space is at a premium in the school kitchens."

Donna Pratt has been school food director for Florence County District One for 10 years. She still recalls her first year when the state education office asked how many commodity mixed vegetables she could use.

"Thinking we would get several shipments, I asked for 1,000 cases for the



Donna Pratt (left) uses USDA tuna in a popular salad plate. Many schools serve salad dressings made with USDA ingredients.



year. You can imagine my surprise when all of the cases came in at one time. We ate a lot of mixed vegetables, but we didn't waste any! I learned quickly to ask only for amounts of commodities that we could comfortably store," Pratt laughs.

## **Foods used in imaginative ways**

More than 10,000 students eat lunch in Florence schools each day. Forty-five percent of them receive lunches free or pay a reduced price, slightly less than the national average of 49 percent.

"Commodities are the salvation for schools that serve a low percentage of free and reduced-price lunches," Pratt says. "Since these schools don't receive as much federal reimbursement as schools serving high numbers of free and reduced-price meals, they depend on commodities to supplement their commercial purchases and keep costs down."

Pratt's lunch managers use a daily control sheet that evaluates each food item, including commodities. "We have found the commodities to be excellent in quality," says Pratt. "There is no difference from commercial foods. The variety of commodity products is also very good, which helps us provide more choices in our menus."

Florence schools use the commodity ground beef often for a number of different entrees—spaghetti with meat sauce, meat loaf, pizza, chili, beef-and-macaroni casserole, and the always popular hamburger. Commodity canned meats are also used in a variety of ways to lower meal costs.

"We save money by mixing in half canned pork with our barbecue, and the kids love it. Many of our lunch managers use the commodity tuna with lettuce, egg, cheese, and tomato in a salad plate each day," Pratt says.

Many dessert favorites also feature commodity foods. "Calypso cookies," for example, are made with USDA-donated applesauce, raisins, and nonfat dry milk. Sweet potatoes, cherries, fig nuggets, and honey are other commodities used in dessert items. Honey is used in place of sugar in many recipes.

Pratt says she wouldn't be able to serve some items—cherries, for example—if they weren't provided as com-

Donna Pratt finds she can offer students more choices by using a variety of donated food. Her schools serve 10,000 lunches a day.

modities. In some recipes, donated foods can be used instead of more expensive items.

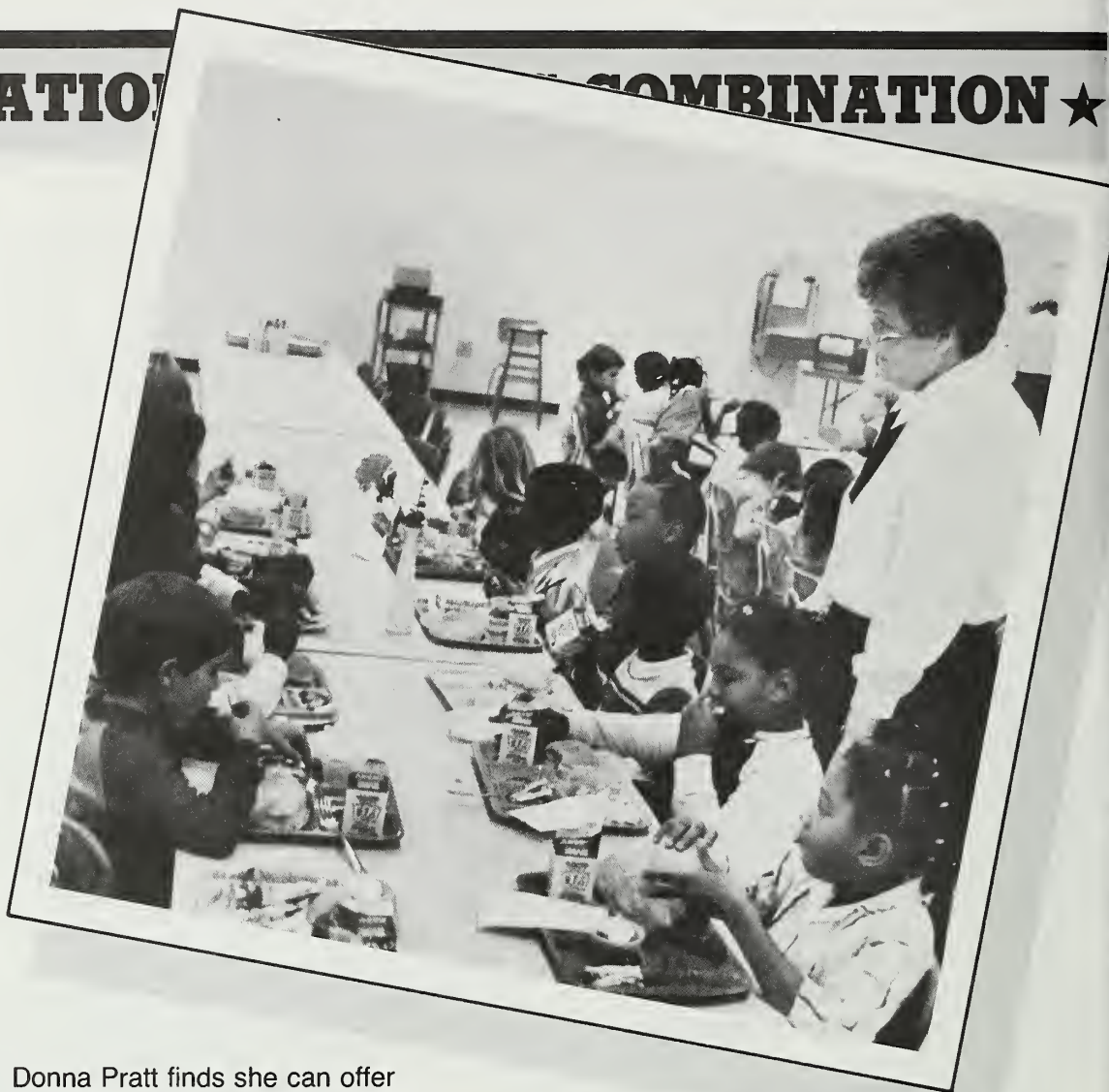
"We never buy pecans because we have the commodity peanuts," says Pratt. "We use USDA honey as a sauce for our chicken nuggets, and there's no limit to the ways we use the commodity peanut butter."

## **Foods are now easier to use**

Pratt has been pleased with changes USDA has made with commodities, especially in the packaging.

"I've seen a lot of improvements that the state advisory board has suggested. This year we are getting commodity flour in 10-pound bags, which reduces spoilage and makes it easier to handle. Ground beef is also available in smaller packages, which cut down on waste," Pratt says.

Florence schools participate in a program that provides rebates on commercial products that have been processed with USDA commodities. With rebates, Pratt saves money on items such as pizza, mayonnaise, salad dressings, and tartar sauce.



Donna Pratt is not shy about asking for any commodity items that are available. But she hasn't forgotten the lesson from 10 years ago—to take all she needs but use all she takes.

School food service directors like Donna Pratt and Catherine Cary know the importance of our country's farm products in the school lunch program. They also know that donated foods help them keep prices low and meal quality high—and that's what keeps their customers coming back.

For more information, contact:  
Catherine Cary, Director  
School Food Services  
Muscookee County Schools  
1532 Fifth Ave. Room 15  
Columbus, Georgia 31901  
Telephone: (404) 324-5661

Donna Pratt, Director  
Food Services Department  
319 South Dargan Street  
Florence, South Carolina 29501  
Telephone: (803) 669-4141

*article and photos  
by Kent Taylor*



# ★ WINNING COMBINATION ★ WINNING COMBINATION ★

## Creative Menus Respond to Kids' Needs and Tastes

Food service director Ruth Moskowitz has learned during her 14-year career with the Elizabeth, New Jersey, school district, that being adaptable is a necessary ingredient in running a successful food service operation.

By being adaptable, she manages to keep up with the food preferences of the 15,000 students she serves daily. She is also able to use USDA commodities imaginatively and to find ways to adjust her program to accommodate students who have special needs or are in schools without adequate food service equipment.

The majority of the students Moskowitz serves come from families whose children qualify for free and reduced-priced meals. Seventy-eight percent of the children participating in the Elizabeth program receive free lunches; 10 percent pay a reduced price for their meals.

### Food service has dual role

Moskowitz feels school food service programs should teach as well as feed children. "School food service should be much more than a filling station," she says. "We should provide a wide variety of foods so students can educate their tastebuds." Her feelings are evident in her enthusiasm for using USDA-donated foods.

Moskowitz uses all of the USDA foods offered to her. A former test kitchen supervisor for Lipton, she often experiments to come up with new ways to use commodities.

For example, she uses donated lemon juice to make salad dressings. She bakes donated honey into cookies and bread, and also uses donated figs and sweet potatoes in fig bars and muffins. She has even created a whip using donated apricots.

"Commodities are the basis for our program," Moskowitz says. "We have to purchase very little on the outside to complement the foods that are offered to us. The commodities are so varied that we plan our menus around them.

"If you don't plan the menus around commodities, you have to operate at a loss or charge the child a much higher cost for the lunch. We don't refuse anything."

### Lunch program is popular

Lunch participation in the 28 units of the Elizabeth school system averages 80 percent. Moskowitz and her staff work hard to provide nourishing, well-balanced meals that appeal to students' tastes.

"We observe the product selection in fast food establishments—and we have them all—and we notice what seems to be going and try to get that product into our cafeterias," Moskowitz says.

"We serve some of the same items that fast food outlets offer because we feel that's how to keep the students coming back to our cafeterias."

In addition to the more standard fare like hamburgers, hot dogs, and french

fries, Moskowitz offers her students tacos, pizza, turkey in pita pockets, kidney bean salads, fish filets on buns, Texas beef barbecue, onion rings, and Philadelphia-style steak sandwiches.

Medleys of vegetables in special sauce round out the midday meal service, and there is also an extensive salad bar, which is popular with students concerned about weight control.

### Adjustments made for special needs

Helping children with special needs is a priority for the administrators and food service team of the Elizabeth school district.

Among the students for whom they've developed special programs are pregnant teenagers, who may need encouragement and support to stay in school.

"We believe in trying to do something to break the poverty cycle," says



A former test kitchen supervisor, Ruth Moskowitz has come up with some new ways to use USDA food. Sweet potato muffins are one of her many successes.



# ★ WINNING COMBINATION ★ WINNING COMBINATION ★



Moskowitz. "If we're able to keep a girl in high school until she completes her education, we may equip her with skills to take a job and keep it."

Moskowitz has adapted breakfast and lunch recipes to more than meet the nutritional needs of the pregnant teens. "We have dairy products—milk and cheese—and lots of fresh fruits and vegetables available to them," she says.

As soon as the pregnancy begins to show, the teens can attend classes in a different area of the school. Along with their regular curricula, home economics and secretarial courses are stressed.

After the girls give birth, the babies can be brought to a day care center on campus. The mothers have breakfast with their babies and then go to school.

## **Some schools have preplated meals**

One of the biggest challenges for Moskowitz was starting a food service program for children in the dozen elementary schools that do not have adequate food service equipment. After careful examination of various options, she decided to serve preplated meals in these schools.

"I found after doing some research that the most nutritious, safest kind of food delivery for schools without adequate equipment would be frozen, preplated meals," she explains.

For handicapped students who attend these schools, Moskowitz expanded the meal service to include breakfast. This is because the special needs children are older or larger than other children in their schools, and the preplated meals are portion controlled to meet the needs of the smaller children. The added breakfasts provide the extra food the special needs children require.

Statistics show that the preplated meals are popular. Sixty-nine to 100 percent of the students participate in the lunch program in these satellite schools. As in her other schools,

---

Hamburgers made with USDA-donated beef are one of students' favorites. Texas beef barbecue, tacos, and pizza are some of the other popular items made with USDA food. Moskowitz uses donated ingredients in her regular meal service as well as in preplated meals.

Food and Nutrition



# ★ WINNING COMBINATION ★ WINNING COMBINATION ★

Moskowitz serves a variety of foods the children enjoy.

Hero sandwiches, pizza burgers, potato rounds, fish sticks, and chicken nuggets are just a few of the items offered during a month. Chicken and pizzas are served in individual boxes similar to those used by take-out restaurants.

Currently, Moskowitz has a contract with two companies to package the preplated meals. In the bidding specifications for the contracts, Moskowitz includes a statement that requires contractors to use USDA-donated commodities, provided the items are conducive to tray assembly lines.

"We require that the packer promise to use a certain amount of USDA-donated foods if they are available," Moskowitz says.

Some of the USDA-donated foods used in the preplated meals are frozen ground beef and beef patties, canned beef, cheddar and mozzarella cheeses, canned and cut-up frozen

chicken, and frozen whole and rolled turkey.

Other items used include frozen green beans, corn, peas, potatoes, baked beans, macaroni, spaghetti, rice, nonfat dry milk, butter, margarine, canned tomatoes, and tomato paste.

## **Flexibility is essential**

In planning preplated meals as in other parts of her program, Moskowitz has to be flexible. "Food products and their emphasis change, situations change, and students change," she says.

"I have to adapt to these changes to help me maintain a program that's well accepted. Students today are more alert to new trends, and they like to try

products they see advertised. I have to be quick to pick up on these new trends."

By being sensitive to her students, Ruth Moskowitz has built a dynamic, popular school food service program. She's managed not only to adapt to change, but to direct it, making special efforts to meet the needs of children in her district.

For more information, contact:  
Ruth Moskowitz, Director  
Food and Nutrition Services  
Elizabeth School District  
130 Trumbull Street  
Elizabeth, New Jersey 07206  
Telephone: (201) 558-3093

*article and photos  
by Marian Wig*





# Getting Food to Local Agencies

## A Look at the Role of a State Food Distribution Director...

A call comes in from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

"We're going to have a nationwide distribution of frozen beef," says the FNS program specialist on the line, and your state's share will be 27 truckloads. That's roughly about 40,000 pounds per truckload.

"Now, how many truckloads of pat-

ties do you want, and how many truckloads of bulk beef?"

There are a few people in this country who could come up with an answer almost as soon as the question is posed. They are at once salespeople, dispatchers, disaster coordinators, arbitrators, investigators, transportation engineers, teachers, accountants, and communicators. As a group, they're called state food distribution directors.

One of them is John (Jack) Nelson, head of Virginia's food distribution program for the past 14 years. He is confident, well-spoken—not shy about giving you an opinion or two on food distribution. He succeeds in running a

dynamic state operation that accepts, stores, and distributes more than \$33.2 million worth of USDA-donated food yearly.

As Nelson explains, the job of the state distribution director is both complicated and demanding.

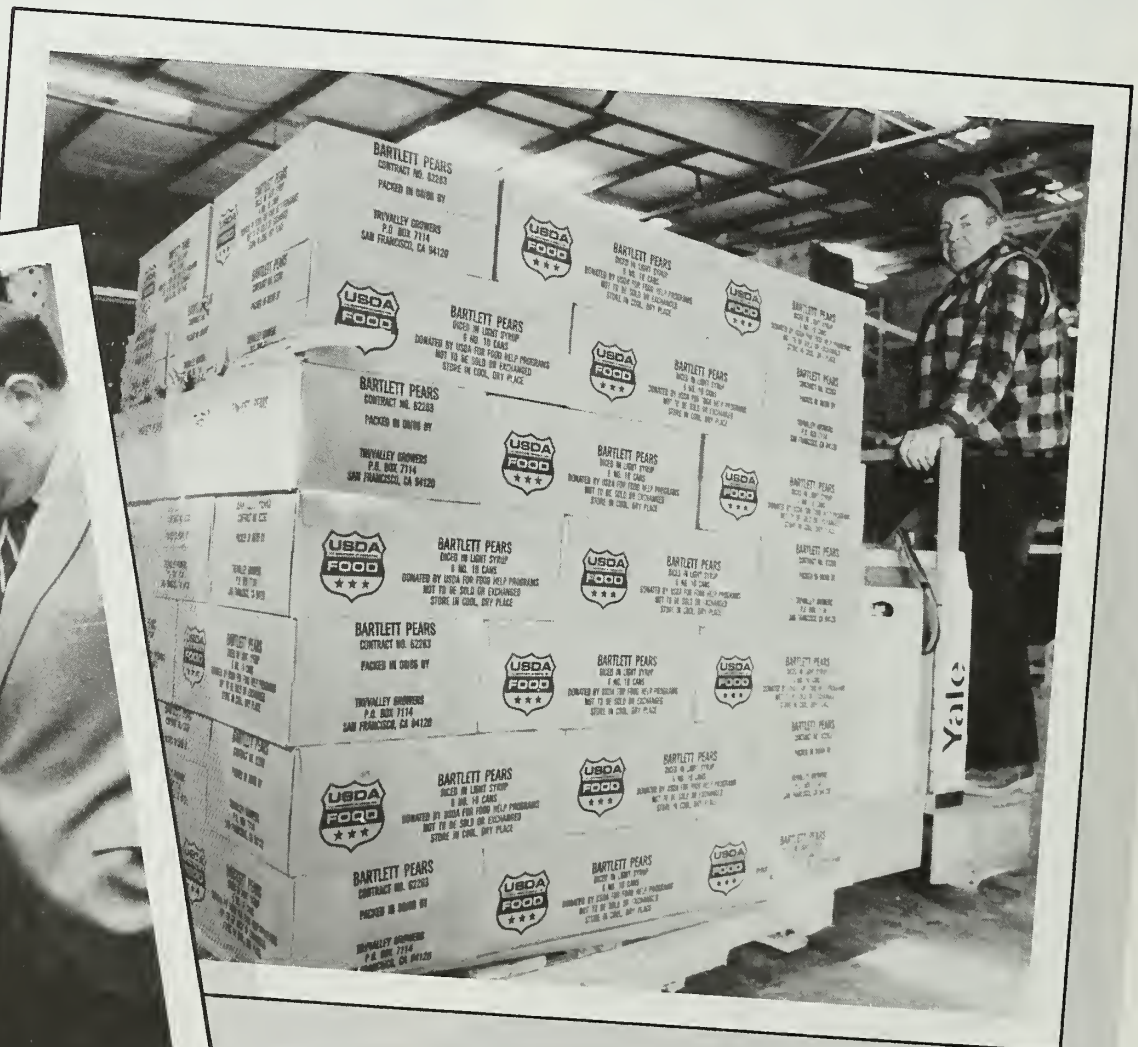
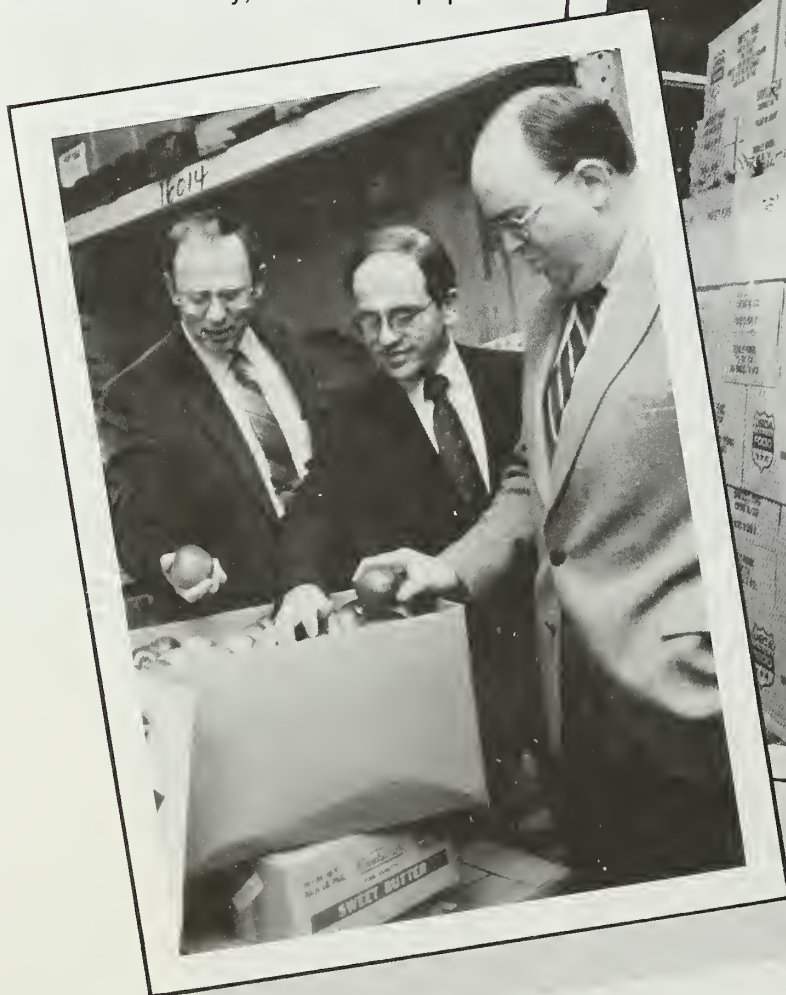
"I'd say one thing," he says, "there is no typical day. Every day we have to do a whole lot of coordinating and communicating with other people to get the job done. But I can focus in on five or six major responsibilities of the director."

### Determining how much to order

One major responsibility is to determine how much food is needed for the state's programs and when it is needed.

USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) provides Nelson with a list of foods that can be ordered, such as grains, oils, peanut products, flour, and dairy products. "These are what we call the readily available items or Section 416-type foods," Nelson explains.

Virginia has contracts with six commercial firms to store and deliver USDA food to local agencies. Here, Jack Nelson (center) and state area office supervisor Rod Plowman (left) visit Merchants Grocery, a firm in Culpeper.





"We determine the quantities to accept by reviewing what the schools and other agencies eligible to receive those specific commodities say they can use and by looking at the available shipping periods."

For other foods, such as meats, fruits, vegetables, and poultry items, the state receives an allocated share that is predetermined by USDA.

"In this instance," Nelson says, "we determine how much food Virginia will accept of the quantity offered and try to estimate when is the best time to receive the food."

With another group of food called "bonus commodities," the state can elect to receive as much as can be used without waste. The period of time during which these foods are offered may vary depending on market conditions and federal inventory levels.

"With bonus foods," says Nelson, "we must be careful to time our acceptance in order to avoid paying extra storage costs once the food comes into Virginia." For instance, if schools cannot accept bonus butter or cheese within a 60-day period, they must pay an additional storage cost ranging from 30 cents to \$1.00 per case.

"Take an example like all the bonus beef we were offered last year," Nelson continues. "We had to estimate what was going to be available and for how long. Sometimes we play a little Russian roulette—do we accept what's offered us this week, or do we say, 'No, we can't take any at this point,' and hope it's going to continue to be available?"

### **Building a solid distribution system**

Another major responsibility of the state director is to design, operate, and maintain a statewide distribution system that will get the food to local agencies in the most efficient manner for the least cost.

This may involve using state warehouses, commercial warehouses under state lease, or contracts with commercial distributors for storage and delivery. It's the nuts and bolts of actually getting the food out to recipient agencies.

Adding to the challenge is the diversity of these agencies. Besides schools, they include child care facilities, nutrition projects for the elderly, summer camps, charitable institutions and TEFAP (Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program) agencies,

USDA food goes to 135 public school districts in Virginia. These students are from the Culpeper School District.

local social service departments, and food banks.

Six years ago, eager to provide better service to recipient agencies, Virginia initiated a project to improve the delivery system.

At that time, a "car-door" or "tail-gate" delivery system was used throughout the state. "Incoming food, like a railcar or truckload of cheese or butter or canned green beans, would come in to a designated area where we would have a major school district serve as a consignee for us," Nelson explains.

The school food service personnel in that district would call each recipient agency getting food in the shipment and say, "We're going to unload this car tomorrow morning at 8 o'clock. Be there!"

"Not always knowing exactly when foods were coming in was a problem," Nelson continues. "You'd have everyone lined up, and if the truck didn't arrive on time, they'd wait and sometimes they'd have to go home

with nothing unless some other food happened to come in on the same day. Then they'd get one item instead of two, or two instead of three."

By taking advantage of technical assistance offered by USDA through a private consultant, Nelson was able to pilot test the use of a commercial distribution system in the rural south-central section of Virginia.

Under the test, commercial distributors received and stored donated food in their warehouses, and shipments of donated food were piggybacked onto the regularly scheduled deliveries of commercial items to schools and institutions.

At the end of the first year, schools and recipient agencies were asked to respond to a survey about the new system.

"The few that were not too happy with it initially were delighted, and acceptance of it was unanimous," Nelson says. "Everybody preferred this system. Nobody wanted to go back to the old system."





Over the next 3 years, Nelson gradually phased in the new system statewide. For other state directors interested in similar delivery systems, he offers this advice: "Do as much outreach work as possible—talk to the commercial food distributors and recipient agencies and sell them on the system."

### Working with local agencies

Keeping recipient agencies informed is another important part of a state distribution director's job.

When an applicant school or agency meets USDA criteria to receive donated foods, Nelson signs an agreement with the agency establishing a legal basis to get the food. Nelson has agreements with more than 500 recipient agencies in Virginia, including some 235 public and private school districts.

"New personnel in recipient agencies must be made totally aware of their responsibilities," says Nelson. "Every time a school food service director is hired, we must educate the new director about the program."

Nelson shows new directors how to order, keep records, control inventory levels (to prevent any excess of food), and how to anticipate future food needs.

"It's critical to make them aware of the agreements they have signed with us to operate the program," he says. "Sometimes the new personnel don't fully understand the program they're operating or the agreements that were made with us before they came on board."

According to Nelson, some problems have occurred in the past, given the amount of turnover in some recipient agencies. To prevent this from happening, he feels his field agents should do their best to stay on top of such organizational changes.

### Responding to immediate needs

Making sure TEFAP foods are properly distributed to commercial distributors and local agencies also demands a lot of attention.

Since 1983, the state has handled more than 48 million pounds of TEFAP foods worth well over \$60 million. Annual reviews of each of Virginia's 128 TEFAP agencies are done to ensure that the foods are being properly stored, used, and accounted for.

"We, in essence, have a two-fold



TEFAP operation," says Nelson. "We offer food to the local social service agencies once a quarter for the general distribution to the needy population, and we provide food to the food banks and their member agencies on a continuous basis.

"The food banks and their member agencies provide food help to people whose food stamps have run out or who have been victims of fire, theft, and so forth."

There is constant communication on day-to-day matters between Nelson's office and recipient agencies. "On any given day," he says, "we might receive a call about cheese being stolen or having something wrong with it.

"If we can determine the source agency, that's where we'll start our investigation. We'll go to the school, TEFAP distribution site, or wherever, and we'll do our best to determine the legitimacy of the complaint."

Numerous calls come from groups and individual recipients who have

questions about the program or about foods already distributed. "The callers range from inmates in correctional institutions to different religious or ethnic groups who want specific information about the food, like, 'Do the foods contain any pork products?' or 'Is any pork-derived enzyme used to culture the cheese?'"

There is no better illustration of how critical it is for his office to keep in close contact with recipient agencies, Nelson says, "as when there is some potential health hazard due to contamination of a product with various substances, like chemicals.

"In these situations," he says, "we get right on the phone and immediately contact every recipient agency that had participated in the shipment."

If a food is declared unfit for human consumption, the state director must make sure that it is removed from any of the places where it is stocked, such as warehouses or schools. Infested food must be separated from good



Culpeper cafeteria manager Rachel McAlister (left) uses USDA ingredients in many entrees as well as desserts, including these freshly baked cookies.

food, and a plan for disposing the food and recovering any value through salvage must be devised.

Nelson is in charge of determining why a food loss occurred and who is responsible. He says, "Sometimes it's the shipper's fault, and sometimes it's the receiving agency's fault.

"That's why another important responsibility of mine," Nelson says, "is to provide technical assistance to recipient agencies and schools on the receipt, storage, and utilization of donated foods."

The agencies must follow certain general practices, like making sure they receive the amount and type of food they "sign for" and that the condition of the food is good. Nelson will assist agencies in determining what storage conditions—either dry, refrigerator, or freezer—will prevent food from spoiling.

### Helping when disaster strikes

During Nelson's 14-year tenure, he has been an important link in emergency efforts to feed victims of natural disasters.

In November 1985, for example, Nelson made \$17,733 worth of commodities available to voluntary organizations operating mass feeding sites for flood victims in five Virginia counties.

When disaster strikes, the state food distribution director alerts the FNS regional office to the location and geographic extent.

If the disaster is so extensive that normal commercial distribution of food is impossible (supermarkets and other food stores are closed), he requests USDA approval to distribute donated foods to individual households. Otherwise, he makes donated foods available to organizations such as the Red Cross or Salvation Army for use in relief centers.

Regardless of the magnitude of the disaster, Nelson says, "the important thing in this whole process is to maintain constant communication with the state department of emergency services (an umbrella organization in Virginia that coordinates all relief activities at the disaster site), the volunteer feeding agencies, and the USDA regional office."



### Strengthening lines of communication

In day-to-day operations as in emergencies, Nelson plays a key role in coordinating state and local activities and in representing the needs of local agencies to the federal government.

"One of my responsibilities," says Nelson, "is to closely monitor any proposed changes in federal regulations affecting our program and to implement changes required by final regulations."

"We have a process in Virginia where we advise recipient agencies of impending changes and solicit their input. This guarantees that the recipient agencies, warehousemen, and individual participants are aware of the proposed changes."

Concerns or suggestions of local agencies are funneled up to the Virginia Commissioner of Agriculture and Consumer Services who, in turn, responds to USDA. "We attempt to shape the final regulations by sensitizing the federal government to how changes would affect operations at the local level," says Nelson.

Besides coordinating his activities with recipient agencies, program participants, and federal counterparts, he coordinates with many different departments in Virginia state government. He also works with associations, such as the state school food service association, which represents local food service personnel.

"As you can see," says Nelson, "what helps me keep things running as smoothly as possible is two-way communication."

When asked about the challenges he envisions for himself in his additional role as president-elect of the National Association of State Agencies for Food Distribution, Nelson says with conviction, "I would like to see the state directors keep an open mind about changes in the program and try to get away from the finger-pointing that's gone on in the past."

"We have to totally accept the fact that we have a cooperative program. We have to strengthen communication at all levels—from USDA to states, to local agencies, and back up. We have to dispel the notion that food distributing agents simply order and deliver food."

"We have to raise the awareness level of our state members of the need to overcome barriers currently preventing maximum available service to our recipient agencies."

"States must look seriously at technical assistance that is available, either from USDA, other states, or recipient agencies, and must take advantage of the right type of assistance for their programs."

"Technical assistance is not a magic wand that will solve all our problems, but it can be used as a starting point for improving the program."

For more information, contact:  
John W. Nelson  
Virginia Department of Agriculture and  
Consumer Services  
P.O. Box 1163  
Richmond, Virginia 23209

*article by Cynthia Bumber  
photos by Larry Rana*



# When Disaster Strikes

## Relief Agencies Feed Thousands With USDA Food

The tornado in Fisher, an Arkansas town of 350, southwest of Jonesboro, struck in the dead of night. It completely destroyed the post office and 18 homes, and tore up another 25 houses. Five persons were killed. The governor estimated the damage at \$15 million.

"I remember that night very well," recalls Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) food program specialist John Lindsay. "I have a weather scanner at home to watch for this kind of problem, but I picked this one up on the police radio. I heard there were ambulances racing to Fisher."

Like many times before during his 12 years with FNS' Jonesboro satellite office, Lindsay got in touch with the county judge.

"I worked with the judge for the next 10 days or so," he says. "I went to Fisher two or three times daily and clocked in more than 800 miles before it was over."

### USDA food was rushed to scene

During any natural or man-made disaster, food donated by USDA is made available to official relief agencies.

"The tornado in Fisher would be a typical example of when we may ask for USDA commodities," says Burton Zavelo, disaster coordinator for the Arkansas Department of Human Services.

The very first meals served to tornado victims and workers repairing the damage in Fisher came from local sources, but as soon as USDA commodities became available the day after the tornado struck, up to 200 meals were served daily.

The feeding went on for 10 days. The homeless were put up with relatives and neighbors, with the help of the Red Cross and local church groups.

Priscilla Schmitz, disaster coordinator for FNS' Southwest region, says that USDA commodities are normally

made available from the nearest school to make it possible to prepare emergency meals.

"That's because schools have the facilities and know-how to serve large groups," she says. "Any USDA commodities in storage at schools may be used for mass feeding." Later, USDA will replace the commodities used.

The USDA commodities rushed to Fisher came from Batesville, Arkansas. Zavelo would have preferred to ask for commodities from Jonesboro, but it was the district's spring break and most school buildings were inaccessible.

Gertrude Applebaum, for 40 years a food service director with the Corpus Christi (Texas) Independent School District, has gone through many disasters where her schools were made available to feed large numbers of people.

"In Corpus Christi schools," she says, "we can prepare 5,000 sandwiches or 20,000 hot meals based on USDA commodities."

"These commodities are wonderful," she says. "They can help feed an awful lot of people after any disaster."

When food needs to be replaced, USDA purchases additional commodities or transfers food from storage.

"USDA commodities are very, very important in any disaster," says Zavelo. "In small towns, like Fisher, where fast food outlets and supermarkets are nonexistent and there's no way to get ready-to-eat donated meals, these commodities are practically the only alternative."

### Disaster teams respond quickly

Priscilla Schmitz relies heavily on people like John Lindsay while responding to natural disasters, such as hurricanes, tornadoes, storms, and floods, or man-made disasters, like chemical contamination.



When a tornado struck the small Arkansas town of Fisher, friends and neighbors were quick to offer help. Using USDA-donated food, volunteers helped prepare as many



FNS' Southwest region has an experienced disaster response team that can handle any of these emergencies. The team consists, in addition to Schmitz, of employees representing all food assistance programs and 13 field offices scattered throughout the five-state Southwest region.

"We deal early on with the National Weather Service, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), our Office of Regional Operations in Washington, and in some cases with state disaster offices," says Schmitz.

"The hurricanes you can predetermine—we usually make contacts with our field offices which monitor the situation. When there's a flood, water comes quickly, then recedes, so a different response is called for."

Zavelo was among the first people Lindsay called. He also kept in touch with FNS district manager Don Arnette and the agency's Southwest public affairs office, both in Dallas.

The public affairs director acts as a liaison between USDA and other agencies and, when needed, informs disaster victims about the availability of USDA assistance.

"I cannot emphasize strongly enough how critical cooperation with local elected officials is," says Bobby Hood, FNS manager in Arkansas.

"These officials come to the site, assess the damage, set up the chain of command, make requests for assistance, and see that we all work together."

#### **Help available within hours**

Ronnie Rhodes, who served as FNS' Southwest disaster coordinator for 9 years, recalls one instance when the military had to airlift USDA commodities to help the victims of the hurricane and floods that followed in the Houston area.

"The Red Cross and the Salvation Army had large numbers of people to feed," he says, "and we needed beef. We found a good supply in an El Paso warehouse, but we had no means of getting it to Houston as fast as it was needed. We talked to the Department

of Defense, and they airlifted several thousands pounds of it from El Paso within hours."

Whether the emergency is a tornado in Arkansas, flooding in Texas, or a hurricane in Mississippi, FNS and state disaster teams will find a way to get food to victims. It takes coordination, dedication, and a readily available supply of USDA food.

"Luckily," says Priscilla Schmitz, "schools and warehouses have USDA food on hand."

For more information, contact:  
Priscilla Schmitz  
Disaster Coordinator  
Southwest Regional Office, FNS  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1100 Commerce Street  
Dallas, Texas 75242  
Telephone: (214) 767-0206

*article and photos  
by Yves Gerem*



as 200 meals a day for families whose homes had been severely damaged or destroyed.



# Helping Young and Old

## Food and Education Go Hand in Hand At Focus Hope

New trees, leafless and exposed, are being sunk in muddy islands in the middle of Oakman Boulevard, on Detroit's east side. Stiff, cold rain and wind lean them a little toward a long building across the street, a building with a sign that says Focus HOPE Food Prescription Center.

Inside, near the front door in a makeshift kitchen, Mozella Hicks and Mary Dixon are showing two women how to make spinach pie using powdered eggs and dry milk donated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

A dozen elderly people sit nearby, close together, bundled on benches in the warm room. They nod and talk quietly, watching a videotaped nutrition lesson, waiting to have their "prescriptions" filled.

Across the room moms push shopping carts full of canned juices, infant formula, powdered eggs, and their babies. They move their carts quickly through the checkout lines. Young men, volunteers, hurry them in and out of the cold, carrying boxes full of USDA canned meats, potatoes, beans, cheese, honey, farina, and rice.

### Supplemental foods help young and old

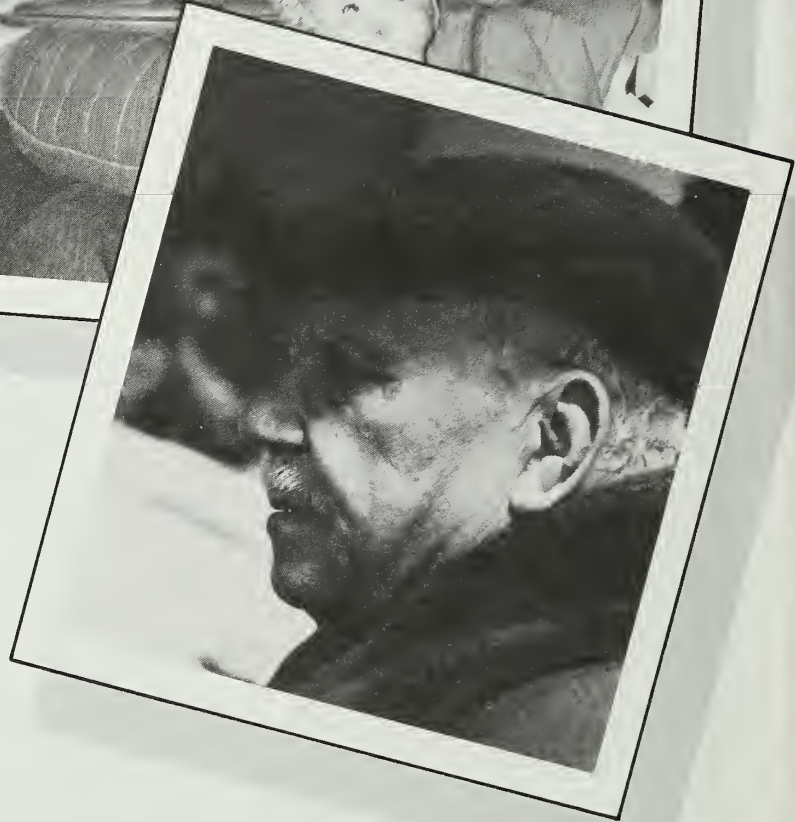
Focus HOPE is one of 30 local agencies nationwide providing USDA-donated food to low-income women, infants, and children through the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP).

Since 1982, Focus HOPE has also operated a relatively new aspect of CSFP, providing monthly food supplements to low-income elderly people.

Begun as one of three pilot projects in the country, Focus HOPE's elderly feeding program started by serving 7,500 elderly people in Detroit and four nearby counties. Last July, when the pilot stage ended, Focus HOPE's program was authorized to provide food for an additional 16,000 elderly. In January, USDA approved the program for another 3,000, bringing total enrollment



Thousands of low-income people take part in Focus HOPE's Commodity Supplemental Food Program. Among them are Elaine Karlie and her twin daughters, and James Manuel, an elderly participant.



to 26,000 people.

Eighty-two-year-old James Manuel, one of those 26,000, hears his name called out by Dave Tobik, food program manager.

"I take the no-salt food," says Manuel.

"Seniors are offered a choice of low-sodium or standard foods," explains Tobik. A former Detroit Tigers pitcher from 1978-82, Tobik was recruited as a Focus HOPE volunteer last year. Like many of the 20,000 Focus HOPE volunteers, he became hooked on helping and now works fulltime at the food center.

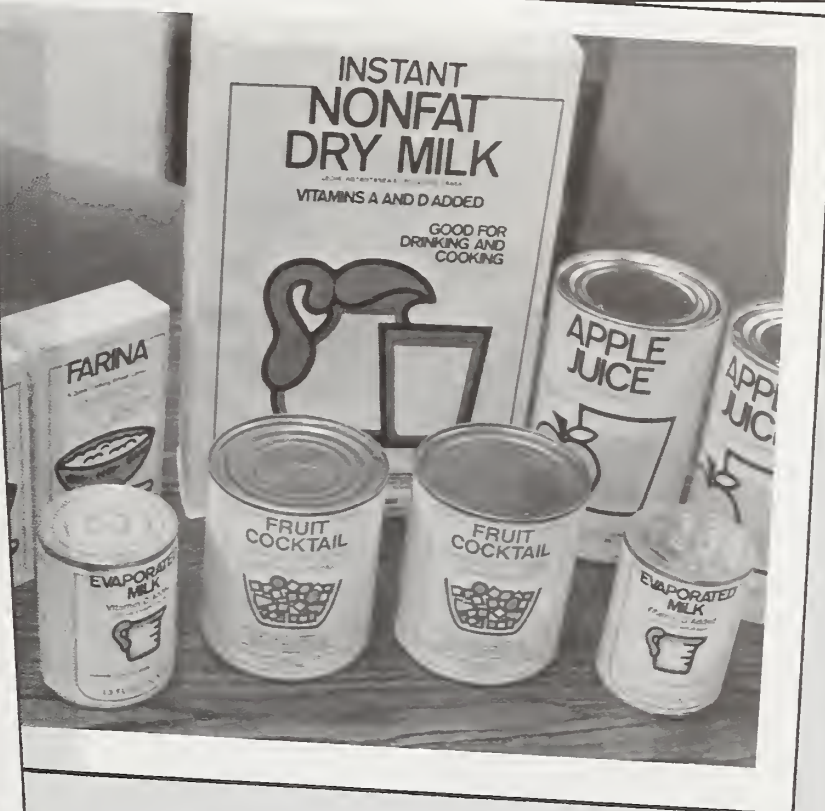
Manuel, who lives with his wife on a small social security check, has been getting the monthly food supplements for the past 4 years.

"I don't have a pension because I was self-employed," he says. "So this really helps to stretch our food for the month."

### Recipients "shop" for their food

Commodities are stored along the walls in large bins, and people "shop" from among 22 different commodity





CSFP participants "shop" for their food supermarket-style. The cans and packages are attractively labeled. Pictured are a few examples.

items, supermarket-style.

Pearl Sales, 76, has just completed her shopping and waits for a volunteer to carry the 40-pound box full of canned juice, meat, powdered eggs, and milk outside to a friend's car.

"I live alone, in senior housing, on a small SSI check," she says. "The food is real good quality. I cook with it all."

According to Focus HOPE's food distribution center director Edna Jackson, quality is one of the reasons USDA food distribution programs are effective.

"USDA commodities can be used exactly as any food you would buy off the shelf in a grocery store," she says. "The processors of USDA food are the same processors who stock our grocery shelves."

Elaine Karlie and her 3-year-old twins, Billie Jean and Kortu, have benefited from USDA commodities for 2 years. Each month, they are among the 38,000 low-income mothers, infants, and young children who receive nutritious food supplements and nutrition education through Focus HOPE's Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP).

"It's excellent," says Karlie. "My kids

love the food, especially the apple and grape juice."

#### **Lessons provided in variety of ways**

Nutrition education is an important part of CSFP.

"We have a variety of education efforts," says food manager Jackson, "such as videotapes, cooking demonstrations, and recipe contests."

Many of the mothers who participate in CSFP lack basic cooking skills. So, to encourage the most nutritious use of commodity foods, Focus HOPE offers mothers a cookbook with simple, easy-to-read recipes written specifically for commodity usage.

"We have our nutrition aides conduct demonstrations on how to cook the different commodity items," says Jackson. "We also have a recipe contest. Moms try the food at home and enter their recipes. Winners receive prizes and have their recipes printed in the cookbook."

"Through USDA's Expanded Food and Nutrition Program, nutrition aides also teach classes in the homes of recipients," she adds. The program is coordinated through USDA's Cooperative Extension Service of Michigan State University.

#### **Clients like the variety offered**

Although Donna Fant and her four

children have been regular supplemental food clients for several years, she still watches the videotaped nutrition classes and attends the cooking demonstrations.

"What I like best is the variety, something different every time," she says.

Fant says she had difficulty the first time she tried the powdered eggs. "Now I just follow the recipe step by step, and I use it for cornbread and everything."

Edna Jackson points out that the commodities are not intended to be a complete meal for each day, but to supplement what recipients have.

"The idea is to teach clients how to make the most of both their food stamps and the commodities they receive, how to make the two work together," she says.

Work. Together. The two words are heard often around Focus HOPE, where USDA food and nutrition education are working together to help thousands of people have more nourishing meals.

For more information, contact:  
Eleanor M. Josaitis  
Associate Director, Focus HOPE  
1355 Oakman Boulevard  
Detroit, Michigan 48238  
Telephone: (313) 883-7440

*article and photos  
by Lawrence Rudman*



U.S. Department of Agriculture  
Food and Nutrition Service  
Alexandria, Virginia 22302

Official Business  
Penalty for Private Use, \$300

**THIRD CLASS BULK RATE  
POSTAGE & FEES PAID**  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
Permit Number G-39

Published four times a year by  
the Food and Nutrition Service,  
U.S. Department of Agriculture,  
Alexandria, Virginia 22302

**Richard E. Lyng**  
Secretary of Agriculture

**John W. Bode**  
Assistant Secretary

**S. Anna Kondratas**  
Acting Administrator  
Food and Nutrition Service

**Jan Kern**, Editor  
**Jan Proctor**, Art Director

Yearly subscription: \$5.00 domestic,  
\$6.25 foreign. Single copies: \$1.25  
domestic, \$1.56 foreign. Send sub-  
scription orders to Superintendent of  
Documents, Government Printing Of-  
fice, Washington, D.C. 20402. These  
prices are subject to change without  
notice by the Government Printing  
Office.

The Secretary of Agriculture has deter-  
mined that the publication of this peri-  
odical is necessary in the transaction  
of the public business required by law  
of this Department. The use of funds  
for printing this publication has been  
approved by the Director of the Office  
of Management and Budget.

Prints of photos may be obtained from  
Photo Library, U.S. Department of Ag-  
riculture, Washington, D.C. 20250.

Reference to commercial products  
and services does not imply endorse-  
ment or discrimination by the Depart-  
ment of Agriculture.

All programs of the U.S. Department of  
Agriculture are available to everyone  
without regard to race, color, sex, na-  
tional origin, age, or handicap.



# Food & Nutrition

*Food and Nutrition* is a magazine of  
the U.S. Department of Agriculture.  
In it you'll find articles on the family  
food assistance and child nutrition pro-  
grams administered by USDA's Food  
and Nutrition Service in cooperation  
with state governments and local  
agencies.

A yearly subscription is \$5.00 for four is-  
sues. Foreign subscriptions are \$6.25.  
To subscribe, mail a check or  
money order, payable to the Superin-  
tendent of Documents, to the following  
address: Superintendent of Docu-  
ments, Government Printing Office,  
Washington, D.C. 20402. These prices  
are subject to change without notice by  
the Government Printing Office.



I'd like to subscribe to  
*Food and Nutrition*  
magazine, published by  
the U.S. Department of  
Agriculture's Food and  
Nutrition Service.

**Name** \_\_\_\_\_

**Street** \_\_\_\_\_

**City** \_\_\_\_\_

**State** \_\_\_\_\_ **Zip Code** \_\_\_\_\_